

# The Condor

A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY

Bi-Monthly Bulletin of the Cooper Ornithological Club

Vol. 4. No. 1.

Santa Clara, Cal., January-February, 1902.

\$1.00 a Year

A Trip to Mono Lake, Ornithological and Otherwise.

WALTER K. FISHER

HERE are several ways of reaching Mono Lake, but for rugged beauty I believe none can equal the old Mono Trail, which leads up through the Pass and down Bloody Canyon. Just where this trail originally started is not at present evident. One can strike it from the old Tioga road in the upper Tuolumne meadows. After leaving these broad flower-strewn stretches the trail dashes up some rocky slopes plentifully covered with sturdy lodge-pole pines and gray erratic boulders. These rocks vary in size and have a curious new look as if the glacier had run off and left them only a year or so ago. Much of the exposed rock still retains that polish, or sheen so characteristic of the glaciated areas of the high Sierras. After passing through several little meadows the trail finally works into a broad sulcus between Kuna Crest on the right and Mts. Dana and Gibbs on the left, when it strikes a southeasterly direction and follows the valley in a bee-line for the divide, at Mono Pass. Although the Belding spermophile has from time to time whistled in the little meadows, and the alpine chipmunk frisked about in sun-patches over rocks or among fallen trees, the scarcity of moving life is at once evident. It is now the first of September and perhaps the days have become a trifle cool. Along sunny edges of meadows, robins, Sierra juncos, Audubon warblers, mountain chickadees and creepers are feeding energetically, but the cooler parts of meadows and woods are almost deserted by birds, except perhaps for the occasional tap of a woodpecker or the flash of a passing flicker's wing. Among the dwarf gray-green willows that border small streams white-crowned sparrows are quietly attentive to passing events, and a seductive squeak may possibly induce a pileolated warbler to forsake its shelter and take a momentary swing on some low-bending *Orthocarpus* stalk.

The long meadow that occupies the hollow leading to Mono Pass rises very gradually, and a small stream runs down it toward the Tuolumne, from out the very throat of the pass itself. Here at the divide, 10599 feet above the ocean, is a little roundish pond that discharges its waters east and west—west into the Pacific and east into Mono Lake. The pass itself is the windiest place under heaven. Stunted and weather beaten, the white-barked pines stand on the very rim of the ridge, their branches painfully distorted. All the Clarke crows appear to go through this pass in great haste. When they attempt to fly westward against the wind they are sometimes obliged to tack, and I noted one lazy fellow who gave it up in disgust and turned tail, all his feathers trying to outstrip him in the race.

The gentler grades of the west slope all end at the summit. Appearances seem

to indicate that the east slope, down at least to Mono plain, was made in a hurry. Bloody Canyon is steep, raw and picturesque. Cliffs and slides rise on either hand, bare and reddish, but the name refers to the bloody trail that cattle

used to leave on the sharp loose rock. The canyon was done over by an eccentric glacier in days gone by, and one descends by a series of several rude steps. These small cold lakes add much to the wild charm of the place, which is further enhanced by groves of trembling asp, lodge-pole, Jeffrey, and flexilis pines, silver fir and Douglas spruce. One of the lakes, the second, really a mere pond occupies a very deep hole in the earth. It is suggested that this same eccentric



PHOTO BY DR. C. HART MERRIAM.  
TUOLUMNE MEADOWS MT. DANA, ON EXTREME LEFT, MT. GIBBS AND KUNA  
CREST. MONO PASS IS BETWEEN GIBBS AND KUNA CREST.

glacier stood on its head and spun around, like a demented fly, till it had accomplished considerable damage. Once a mule loaded with canned sardines disappeared into the pond to explore its remote depths. He never came back, and since then the icy pool has born the rather incongruous title of Sardine Lake.

From near the top of the canyon a fine view of the southern half of Mono Lake is to be had, spread out map-like in the gray sage-brush country. Directly in front, extending south from the lake are the remarkable Mono Craters, smooth and gray except for an open forest of pinon pines on their lower slopes.

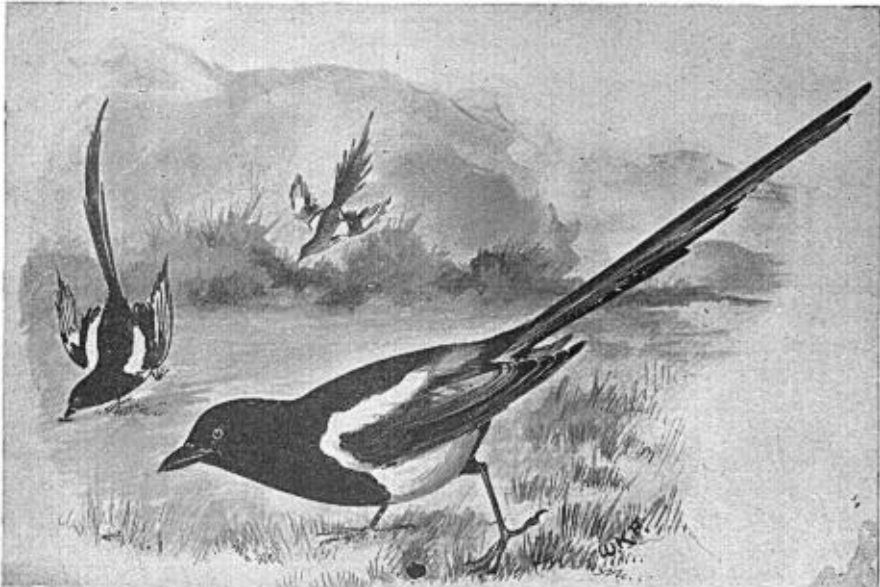
I was glad to reach Farrington's ranch after a weary walk through sandy sage-brush country from the bottom of Bloody Canyon. The ranch is several miles from the southwest corner of the lake—if roundish lakes can have corners—and is right under a splendid nut pine\* hill, completely strewn with huge rocks all jumbled together. The ranch is a capital place to make one's headquarters, and the country about is most diverting. The fact that one drops suddenly from the Boreal of Mono Pass into the Transition and Upper Sonoran of the Mono country



PHOTO BY W. K. FISHER.  
EPHEDRA VIRIDIS NEAR MONO LAKE.

\*Pinus monophylla.

must certainly add much to a peculiar interest that attaches to the region. Although in early summer the Sierran fauna probably keeps fairly apart and distinct from that of the Mono basin, in late summer after the nesting season is over this distinctness is broken, and there is a large invasion of the valley by mountain species—particularly by the immature birds. This is well illustrated by the occurrence of such typical Sierran birds as Cabanis woodpecker, Clarke crow, Hammond flycatcher, white-crowned sparrow, Audubon warbler, Louisiana tanager, Tolmie warbler, mountain chickadee and robin, along with the mourning dove, marsh hawk, poor-will, magpie, California jay, western vesper sparrow, Brewer sparrow, sage thrasher and western house wren, which properly belong to foothills and valleys. The country around Mono Lake is, however, by no means low, being considerably over 6000 feet, but the high summer temperature of the Great Basin region characterizes also this sub-sidiary basin, and we have the rather common occurrence of a low zone at a comparatively high altitude.



MAGPIES.

The country about Farrington's is differentiated into foothills and plains, and this plain, which surrounds the lake, and which is undoubtedly a part of the basin of an older and larger lake, is variously terraced, and cut by small arroyos. The vicinity of the ranch is a favorable gathering place for birds as the broad meadow land and willow-lined streams form an especially inviting field for their activities. So likewise is the high pinyon hill which sends out a long spur backward to join the main precipitous range, and this forms a natural highway along which the mountain species are wont to work in their excursions to the pinyon forests. The willow-bordered streams which come down from Bloody and neighboring canyons also offer a ready means of progress for Tolmie warblers, white-crowned sparrows and similar retiring birds that do not care to take to the open. Thus the ranch might be regarded as a kind of first stopping place for many species, because toward the lake the country is hardly so inviting. The 'sage-brush' is largely composed of *Artemisia*, *Chrysothamnus*, *Kunzia*, *Shepherdia* and *Ephedra*. The usual gray-green is variegated by the bright green leafless *Ephedra* and

the dark *Kunzia*, both being singularly attractive plants despite their rather plain appearance. The *Kunzia* bushes are favorite congregating places for all species. The foliage has a subtle sweet odor that seems agreeable alike to bird and beast.

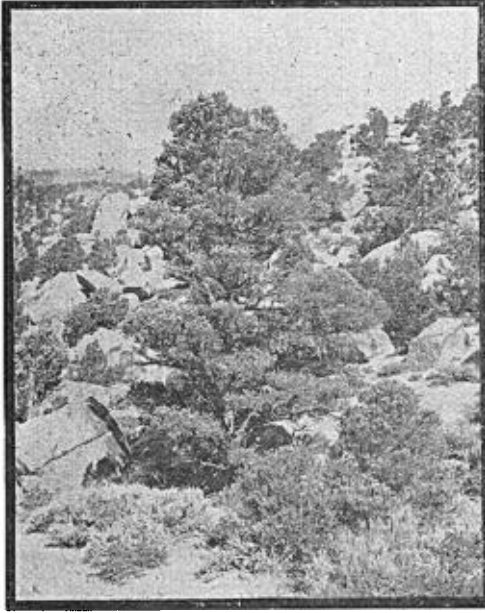


PHOTO BY W. K. FISHER  
PINUS MONOPHYLLA, AND SIDE OF NUT-PINE HILL, NEAR  
FARRINGTON'S RANCH.

The broad meadows and adjacent sandy brush land about Farrington's were the favorite hunting ground of a large number of hawks—individuals rather than species. I came to know one marsh hawk very well as it was continually scouring the fields for meadow mice which were very common, and since the hay had been cut, were segregated more or less in the little patches of uncut grass. This hawk began work soon after daylight and continued its flights with owl-like precision till late twilight. I arrived just after the hay makers had finished their work and was glad to see how enthusiastically the birds entered the fields. Every morning saw small droves of black-billed magpies catching grasshoppers, and their keenest rivals at this relentless warfare were the sparrow hawks. Usually the magpies held forth on the lower slopes of the pinyon hill, where they engaged in

endless squabbles from daylight till dark, the echoes of their profanity reaching me at the ranch house where I must need spend much good time in preparing specimens. So well did these two species do their work that by the end of the week nearly all the grasshoppers had disappeared from the meadows. It proved a very entertaining sight when the magpies chased the grasshoppers as they occasionally would do, for their agility in dodging and circling proved how mistaken we are likely to be in forming an estimate of a bird under ordinary conditions. Usually nonchalant and absurdly dignified in their demeanor, these birds could at times assume the utmost interest in their occupation, and dart with surprising speed here and there. They used their tail about as much as their wings when flying.



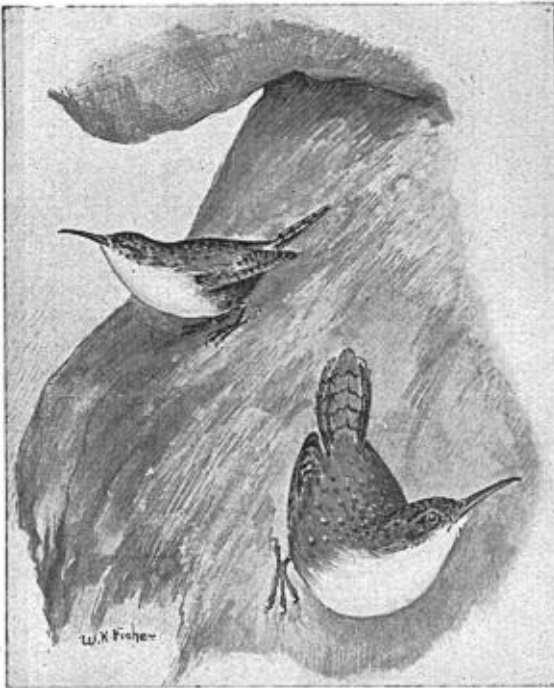
PINYON JAY

Nearly every bush had its group of Brewer sparrows, plain-colored, mild little

birds that form one of the most characteristic features of this kind of country. A persistent squeaking would bring them from all directions, and out of unthought-of recesses in Kunzia or Ephedra bushes green-tailed towhees and young white-crowned sparrows would come tumbling with much fluttering of tails—and presently the more demure vesper sparrows. But the sage thrashers always contented themselves with a distant seat among some golden chrysothamnus blossoms, and craned their necks inquisitively in my direction. Then a sudden movement would scatter the whole audience from this newly found attraction. The western house-wren is fond of the sage brush and spends much of its time slipping mouse-like among the lower branches of the Kunzia and Ephedra. Other birds that found congenial haunts in the open land were the dove, prairie falcon, Swainson hawk, poor-will, Say phoebe, Arkansas kingbird, California jay, meadow-lark, Brewer black bird, linnnet and now and then a stray rock wren or mountain quail. I was told that sage-grouse occur in remote gulches where the sheep have not been, but I saw none.

The pinyon hill had a little set all its own. Clarke crows came in great numbers to feed upon the pine nuts, and had continual altercations with pinyon jays, sharp-shinned hawks, and likewise among themselves. It seemed strange to see them away from the windy cold altitudes with which one usually associates them. The pinyon jays appeared continually in large flocks from the north. They usually made a noisy and cursory survey along the hillside and then departed southward with hoarse leave takings. On the tenth of September a large consignment of mountain chickadees arrived and worked among the pines mid much discussion

and some singing—that queer little song mentioned by Barlow in the last September CONDOR. Hammond flycatchers were not uncommon on this hill, while mountain quail, Cabanis woodpeckers, flickers, California jays, spurred towhees, green-tailed towhees, Audubon warblers and rock wrens were almost daily seen. One Louisiana tanager was observed and one nervous robin. But the most notable little bird of the whole hill—and of the whole west, to my notion, was a canyon wren that sang every morning among the big boulders till the very rocks rang. Altho the same song was repeated over and over I never tired of it. The big-tree thrush among shady solitudes of the forest has just claims for being considered the sweetest of all our western songsters, as Mr. Belding so truly maintains; but



CANYON WRENS

for audacity and the wild abandon of its music the canyon wren is certainly without a rival. To me he seems the most wonderful and weirdest of all our little birds.

About the middle of September I was joined by Mr. Luther J. Goldman with an outfit of horses and we determined to make a trip around to the east side of the lake. Most of our road lay in heavy sand close to the lake shore through a country bright with yellow chrysothamnus blossoms. We passed the end of the Mono Crater range and travelled in a broad uneven sage-brush plain—a plain which rises gradually toward some low nut-pine mountains on the rim of the Mono basin. The lake is evidently rising gradually for in a number of places dead brush extends out into the water some distance. Two islands occupy the center of the lake, one being very light and the other dark. On cool mornings steam is easily seen rising from the hot springs which are on the islands—or at least on the light one. There are also hot springs along the shore and old spring formations are of very common occurrence. The turreted and often deeply fenestrated lime rock gives a somewhat peculiar and weird aspect to parts of the water edge. That morning the lake was smooth as glass and of light clear blue. Thousands of ducks, grebes, and gulls dotted the surface as far as the eye could reach, and close in to shore little squadrons of northern phalaropes swam in circles after



MONO LAKE FROM WEST

PHOTO BY DR. C. HART MERRIAM

flies, reminding one strongly of rudderless boats in an eddying current. The ducks, most of them probably shovellers, mallards and green-winged teal, proved very wild, and flew at five hundred yards. When north winds drive them in large numbers near shore, Indians and some few whites hide behind blinds made of sage brush and mow down the unsuspecting birds in great numbers. The phalaropes come in in countless hundreds and likewise fall easy prey to pot-hunters. The species is locally called 'Mono Lake pigeon' and as a rule they are fairly tame. When



INDIAN BLIND

Dr. C. Hart Merriam visited the lake in August he found them much more abundant than they proved to be when Goldman and I made our trip about the middle of September. California gulls stood in long shining lines on the sunlit beach and were also very

wary, but Goldman succeeded in securing a fine specimen with his rifle. We tried creeping on them, but at the first signal of danger they all arose with those strange 'nautical' cries reminding one of rigging creaking in the wind. I found the end of the first primary much worn off, as though scoured down by beating the sand in their characteristic run, skip and jump start. We secured both the western and horned grebes, and Mr. Vernon Bailey assures me he positively identified the American eared and pied-billed grebes the previous year when he visited the lake. It is wholly probable that the majority of the thousands of grebes that I saw everywhere along the south side of the lake belonged to these two latter species.

We camped about fifteen miles east of Farrington's near a deserted ranch, where a plentiful seepage of fresh water makes a few muddy little meadows, grown up with wiry grass, and filled with little pools of water. Between these meadows and the lake is a tolerably wide dam-like sand beach; behind which are longish ponds of brackish water. The lake itself as it has no outlet is of course very strong with various salts, so strong that when wading in the water one is reminded of sugar syrup. This is seen only when the bottom layers of water are stirred up.

We ensconced ourselves in a remarkable grove of buffalo-berries (*Shepherdia argentea*), remarkable because the bushes were really small trees. Our arrival dislodged a large short-eared owl which seemed very loath to leave, and soon afterward several magpies came in to roost, but suddenly changed their minds and re-

tired some distance to discuss the intruders and pop corks like Barnaby Rudge's raven. When dusk came on the ducks and grebes came nearer land to feed, and small flocks of the former flew up and down the shore till long after dark. A small Branchipus-like Phyllopod swarms in countless millions in the lake and is fed upon by the water birds. The dead and decaying individuals cast ashore mixed with suds and larva exuvia form food for an army of small flies the larvae of which I found alive in the water. These flies are so thick that they form a black zone or band two or three feet wide next to the water all around the lake—"a belt of flies one hundred miles long" as one

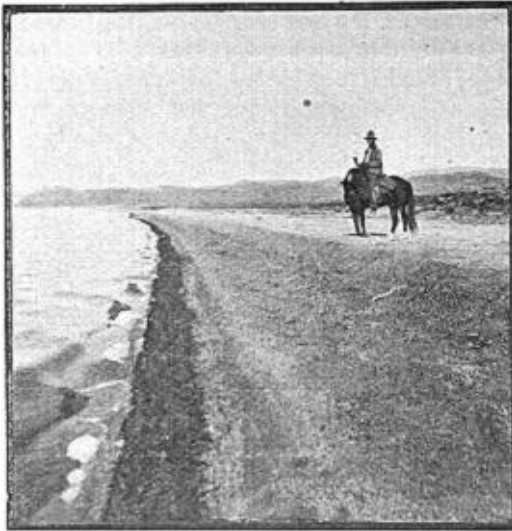


PHOTO BY W. K. FISHER.  
SOUTH BEACH OF MONO LAKE, SHOWING DARK ZONE OF LIVE FLIES.

writer puts it. Grebes, ducks, avocets, killdeers, phalaropes and least sandpipers gorge themselves on both the flies and their larvæ, and even Indians are partial to the latter which they 'pop' before eating, so as to leave the dried casts in little heaps and windrows. Thus is 'natural' economy fulfilled.

Back in the sage-brush the characteristic birds were found, but our little meadow brought to light a few species new to the trip. Western savanna sparrows were common. Several pipits landed for a momentary stroll in the soggy grass but soon departed southward with hysterical peeps. A flock of horned larks passed over. The Brewer blackbirds, everywhere abundant, here associated with

a few bicolored blackbirds, and fed in flocks. Occasionally they rested from their labors in Sheperdia bushes and conversed in wheezy tones, suggesting rusty weather-vanes. Killdeer were abundant and always screamed at the wrong moment. Here I made an unsuccessful attempt upon the life of what I took to be a duck hawk, seated on a faded piece of driftwood, making eyes at a squadron of grebes that were drawing too near. I secured a Sabine gull from one of the little fresh-water ponds where it seemed busy eating something. Doubtless a boat and plenty of ammunition would have brought to light several other gulls, besides terns and numerous ducks.

Our grove of buffalo-berry trees was the rendezvous of a small flock of valley quail, besides Wright flycatchers, linnets, white-crowned sparrows, mountain song-sparrows, Audubon warblers and mountain chickadees.

One of my favorite trips was to start about daybreak and walk cautiously along the beach. Grebes and ducks could be seen feeding in numbers, teal, shovellers and redheads mingling together on the water, but when started the green-wings would separate from the rest and return, if no further disturbance was offered. Avocets were frequently seen wading for Branchipus, and of course the omnipresent northern phalarope; which in early morning frequently associated with the least sandpipers. Occasionally a young black-crowned night heron was aroused from a puddle edge and took refuge among the sage-brush. I am unable to say just what these birds found palatable, for the stomach of one I shot was perfectly empty. I was surprised on one of these trips to come across a small company of bobolinks which were seated on the tops of sage-brush bushes. They seemed curiously out of place in this region among sage thrashers and Brewer sparrows. So continuing along the beach I could see numberless birds at their early morning tasks, and hear their comfortable peeps and quacks from far across the glassy water, varied now and then by a distant splash-splash of some startled duck. Soon, however the early sun would creep over the hills and flood the chilly shore with cheer and warmth. Birds began in real earnest the serious task of preening. It was always about this time too that I sought the thin blue column of Goldman's welcome campfire and his more welcome flapjacks. So long as memory is green may I never forget them, in their warm pan, on a a bed of glowing coals!

\* \* \* \* \*

The following is a list of birds collected or observed at Mono Lake between September 2 and 21, 1901. Identifications which are doubtful have been queried.

<i>Æchmophorus occidentalis</i>	[ <i>Centrocerus urophasianus</i> : reported]
<i>Colymbus auritus</i>	
<i>Larus californicus</i>	<i>Zenaidura macroura</i>
<i>Xema sabinei</i>	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>
<i>Anas boschas</i>	<i>Accipiter velox</i>
<i>Nettion carolinensis</i>	<i>Buteo borealis calurus</i>
<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	<i>Buteo swainsoni</i> (?)
<i>Aythya americana</i>	<i>Falco peregrinus anatum</i> (?)
[ <i>Ardea egretta</i> : identified from plumes]	<i>Falco mexicanus</i>
<i>Nycticorax nycticorax nævius</i>	<i>Falco sparverius deserticolus</i>
<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	<i>Asio accipitrinus</i>
<i>Tringa minutilla</i>	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>
<i>Ægialitis vocifera</i>	<i>Dryobates villosus hyloscopus</i>
<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	<i>Colaptes cafer collaris</i>
<i>Oreortyx pictus plumiferus</i>	<i>Phalænoptilus nuttalli</i>
<i>Lophortyx californicus vallicolus</i>	<i>Chordeiles virginianus henryi</i>
	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>



*Sayornis saya*  
*Empidonax hammondi*  
*Empidonax wrighti*  
*Otocoris alpestris* [arenicola?]  
*Pica pica hudsonica*  
*Aphelocoma californica*  
*Nucifraga columbiana*  
*Cyanocephalus cyanocephalus*  
*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*  
*Agelaius gubernator californicus*  
*Sturnella magna neglecta*  
*Scolecophagus cyanocephalus*  
*Carpodacus mexicanus frontalis*  
*Poecetes gramineus confinus*  
*Ammodramus sandwichensis alauid-*  
*nus*  
*Zonotrichia leucophrys*  
*Spizella breweri*  
*Melospiza melodia montana*  
*Pipilo maculatus megalonyx*  
*Oreospiza chlorura*  
*Piranga ludoviciana*  
*Hirundo erythrogastra*

*Lanius ludovicianus excubitorides*  
*Helminthophila rubricapilla guttu-*  
*ralis*  
*Dendroica aestiva*  
*Dendroica auduboni*  
*Geothlypis tolmiei*  
*Anthus pensilvanicus*  
*Oroscoptes montanus*  
*Salpinctes obsoletus*  
*Catherpes mexicanus* [conspersus?]  
*Troglodytes aedon aztecus*  
*Parus gambeli*  
*Merula migratoria propinqua*

The following additional species were noted by Mr. Vernon Bailey the first of September 1900.

*Podilymbus podiceps*  
*Colymbus nigricollis californicus*  
*Ardea herodias*  
*Cathartes aura*  
*Contopus richardsoni* (Bloody Can-  
 yon)  
*Amphispiza belli nevadensis*



SUNSET ON MONO LAKE.

PHOTO. BY W. K. FISHER.